



## The 2007 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture

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### **Community**

- Introduction

The Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture are designed to foster original scholarship pertaining to youth and the contemporary church. The lectures are delivered as a series at the Princeton Forums on Youth Ministry and are published annually. Lecturers include scholars who are not directly involved in the practice or study of youth ministry but who can bring the fruits of their respective disciplines to bear on ministry with the young.

With its traditional emphasis on group activities, youth ministry cries out for reflection on the meaning of Christian community. How will we create a cohesive community among the youth in our congregations? What do we do when exclusive cliques threaten the health of the youth ministry? How will we engage young people with the wider faith community and with the communities in which we live? Should we try to draw adolescent loners into the youth group? What tools can we offer young people as they engage with other faith communities or communities from other nations?

Theological reflection on community is foundational for addressing these questions faithfully. The 2007 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture provide such reflection. Rather than offering simple steps for building community in your youth group, these lectures use the lenses of friendship, moral formation, reconciliation, and the African Christian concept of communal salvation to shed light on the meaning of Christian community and how it relates to ministry with the young.

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- 2007 Lectures

**Michael Battle**

Is Anyone (Even the Devil) Irreconcilable?  
Practicing Reconciliation in a violent World

**Stanley Hauerwas**

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## Is Anyone (Even the Devil) Irreconcilable? • MICHAEL BATTLE

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### Introduction

Christian spirituality searches for interdependent identity between the individual and the community that continues beyond death. This dynamic (not static) identity creates a peculiar destiny in which an individual and a community cannot be understood apart from one another. Such identity formation is crucial in youth ministry.

In addition, such a relationship between the person and the community both deepens our insights about common salvation and encourages western Christians to mature beyond individualistic spirituality. Through early African Christian concepts of communal salvation, I propose an emerging sense of Christian spirituality enacted through how individual and communal destinies are bound together.

### Forrest Gump

A friend gave me the following story:

Forrest Gump dies and goes to heaven. He is met at the pearly gates by St. Peter himself. The gates are closed, however, so Forrest approaches the gatekeeper. St. Peter says, “Well, Forrest, it’s certainly good to see you. We have heard so many good things about you. I must inform you that the place is filling up fast, and we’ve been giving an entrance quiz for everyone. The tests are short, but you need to pass before you can get into heaven.”

Forrest responds, “It sure is good to be here, St. Peter. I was looking forward to this. Nobody ever told me about any entrance exam. Sure hope the test ain’t too hard. Life was a big enough test as it was.

St. Peter goes on, “I know, Forrest, but the test is only three questions:

1. What days of the week begin with the letter “T”?
2. How many seconds are there in a year?
3. What is God’s first name?”

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Forrest goes away to think the questions over. He returns the next day and goes up to St. Peter to try to answer the exam questions. St. Peter waves him up and says, “Now that you have had a chance to think the questions over, tell me your answers.”

Forrest says, “Well, the first one, how many days of the week begin with the letter ‘T?’ “Shucks, that one’s easy. That’d be Today and Tomorrow.”

The Saint’s eyes open wide and he exclaims, “Forrest! That’s not what I was thinking, but...you do have a point, and I guess I didn’t specify, so I will give you credit for that answer. How about the next one? How many seconds in a year?”

“Now that one’s harder,” says Forrest, “but I thought and thought about that, and I guess the only answer can be twelve.”

Astounded, St. Peter says, “Twelve! Twelve! Forrest, how in heaven’s name could you come up with twelve seconds in a year?”

Forrest says “Aw, come on, St. Peter, there’s gotta be twelve: January second, February second, March second.”

“Hold it,” interrupts St. Peter. “I see where you’re going with it. I guess I see your point, though that wasn’t quite what I had in mind, but I’ll give you credit for that one too. Let’s go on with the next and final question. Can you tell me God’s first name?”

Forrest replied, “Andy.” When St. Peter asked how in the world he came up with the name Andy, Forrest replied, “You know, St. Peter, that song we sing in church: ‘Andy walks with me, Andy talks with me.’”

## Perspectival Difference

The story of Forrest in heaven teaches us the following lesson: there is always another point of view, and just because another person doesn’t see things the same way or understand the same way that I do does not necessarily mean that the difference of point of view displeases God and prevents entry into the Kingdom of God. In fact, according to much of the Bible, the Kingdom of God is mysteriously made to be so dynamic that diversity will be its hallmark (Acts 2 and Revelation 21).

In African Christian spirituality there is a search for balanced destiny between the individual and the community that continues beyond death. This balanced destiny is practiced in an eschatological understanding of how ancestors continually relate to those living on earth. Because those who have died continue to relate to those living on earth, African Christian spirituality balances the living and the dead so that the destiny of both is to be the communion of saints. This African eschatology describes how individual and communal destinies are bound together.

## Pesky Question: Irreconcilable Differences?

So, how do we answer the question, Is anyone (even the devil) irreconcilable? Some of the most profound Christian thinkers answered “no.” For example, Gregory of Nyssa provides the example of how the idea of endless torment was

to many early Christians incompatible with the gospel. For our earliest church theologians, one of the greatest sins of humanity is the tendency toward pride. The problem here is the lesson Jesus was trying to teach the disciples about our limited definitions of what is possible for God and our pride in thinking that we can fully define what God can reconcile. Forgiveness can be experienced not only as a gift given but also as a gift received. The very term “forgiveness” is built on the root “give.” Forgiveness is a symbol, a sacrament of one’s conviction of the givenness of life. In the act of forgiving, believers imitate God. Forgiveness is a creative act that releases us from the prison of the past. The following story sent to me by a parishioner should open us to the reality that there is a chance that we may actually need God to erase the limiting human labels that divide us so easily:

One day God was looking down at earth and saw all of the rascally behavior that was going on. He decided to send an angel down to earth to check it out. So he called out one of his angels and sent the angel to earth for a time. When he returned, he told God, “Yes, it is bad on earth; 95 percent are misbehaving and 5 percent are not.

God thought for a moment and said, “Maybe I had better send down a second angel to get another opinion.” So God called out another angel and sent him to earth for a time too.

When the angel returned he went to God and said, “Yes, the earth is in decline; 95 percent are misbehaving and 5 percent are being good.”

God was not pleased. So he decided to email the 5 percent who were good because he wanted to encourage them. Give them a little something to help them keep going. Do you know what the email said?

No?

I didn’t get one either.

## Answering the Pesky Question

The problem with too-tight definitions is the problem of memory; how do we recall that which lives and moves and has being? How do we know another human being, much less know God’s abilities to reconcile? Once we make definitions of the living and try to remember them, those definitions inevitably change. One of the crucial questions for us in light of the theme of community is, how do we practice reconciliation when those who need to be reconciled keep changing (e.g., Native Americans, African Americans, Jews, gay men and lesbians, geeks, nerds, Goths, jocks, etc.)? The answer is surprising. The ultimate work of reconciliation has already been done by God. Our task is to live into it, recalling God’s work of reconciliation. The mistake in our understanding of God’s work of reconciliation is in our need to control the nature and scope of God’s accomplishment. The need to understand the parameters of divine reconciliation often leads to vapid understandings of reconciliation. For example, the need to define the divine work of reconciliation leads to static concepts of heaven and hell that inform similar mutually exclusive earthly realities. In other words, we think we have an idea of whom God has already ultimately reconciled.

A chaplain at the central prison in Raleigh, North Carolina, told me that Christians in the United States really do not believe in God’s reconciliation. Most Western Christians believe in their own versions of retributive justice and capital punishment, without consulting God. The idea of an individualistic heaven and hell allows Christians in the United States to hold on to static concepts of justice that the powerful get to interpret. And so, despite the glaring discrepancy of mostly Black men being executed on death row, there remains an implicit theological justification of the situation. If they really believed in God, the chaplain said, who creates *ex nihilo* (who even is able to inhabit hell according to

Psalm 139:8), they would know that God's love constantly invites reconciliation without limit.

## **Gregory of Nyssa (334–395 A.D.)**

Gregory of Nyssa was born in Caesarea, the capital of Cappadocia (now central Turkey), in about 334, the younger brother of Basil the Great and of Macrina, among several other distinguished siblings. As a youth, he was at best a lukewarm Christian. However, when he was twenty, some of the relics of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste were transferred to a chapel near his home, and their presence made a deep impression on him, confronting him with the fact that to acknowledge God at all is to acknowledge his right to demand a total commitment. Gregory of Nyssa was one who proclaimed such a love of God constantly made available to us. Such a love is so constant for Gregory that he believed in a universal redemption in Christ for all creatures within the entirety of the universe. He believed this because God's constant love would never give up until we are all won over. Quoting Philippians 2:10, where Paul says every knee would one day bend and every tongue confess the Lordship of Christ to the glory of God, Gregory comments, "In this passage is signified, that when evil has been obliterated in the long circuits of the ages, nothing shall be left outside the limits of good; but even from them [all creatures made by God] shall be unanimously uttered the confession of the Lordship of Christ."<sup>2</sup>

Gregory studies St. Paul's writing to show that through God's reconciliation, all evil will ultimately be removed. For example, Paul mentions this in his Epistle to the Romans: "For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God" (Romans 5:10). Here Paul uses reconciliation as a term to indicate salvation. For as salvation is brought near to us by reconciliation, Paul says in another place, "Having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life" (Romans 5:10). Therefore, Paul says that such enemies are to be reconciled to God in whom death no longer has authority. This is demonstrated by Paul saying, "Death will be destroyed," a clear statement that the power of evil will be utterly removed. When all enemies become subject to God, they (the enemies) will recognize a trace of divinity in themselves. Once death has been destroyed for Gregory, then not even death will exist and we will be subjected to the reign of God's life. But this is not understood as some sort of servile humility. Our subjection consists of a blessedness living in us.<sup>3</sup>

## **Jerome (347–420 A.D.)**

Jerome was the foremost biblical scholar of the ancient church. His translation of the Bible, along with his commentaries and homilies on the biblical books, has made him a major intellectual force in the Western church. Jerome was born in 347 and was converted and baptized during his student days in Rome. On a visit to Trier, he found himself attracted to the monastic life, which he tested in a brief but unhappy experience as a hermit in the deserts of Syria. The reason Jerome is important is that he was a translator of the Hebrew and Greek testaments of the Bible into the common Latin of the time. He was fully aware of all the original words involving a so-called "eternal" damnation that some translators today render as endless and unrelenting torments, but Jerome taught the redemption of all, even the devil and demons! Here are such beliefs of Jerome:

Christ will, in the ages to come, show not to one, but to the whole number of rational creatures His glory, and the riches of His grace, by means of us [Christians]. The saints are to reign over the fallen angels, and the princes of this world, even to them will be brought blessing.<sup>4</sup>

In the restitution of all things, when the true physician, Jesus Christ, shall have come to heal the body of the Church, every one shall receive his proper place. What I mean is, the fallen angel will begin to be that [of an original state] which he was created, and humanity [who was expelled from Paradise] will be once

more restored to the tilling of Paradise. These things then will take place universally.<sup>5</sup>

With God no rational creature perishes eternally. ... For God pities His creatures, and will not suffer those whom He himself has formed to perish eternally, who are sustained by His breath and spirit.<sup>6</sup>

What if we believed that God's love is as relentless as Gregory and Jerome prophesy? Wouldn't we have to reconsider how we solve our problems on earth? I think the answer has to be yes. But how did we come as Christians to have so short an attention span for how God reconciles us? One reason was given by Origen (responding to a critic of Christianity) in *Against Celsus*.

## Origen (185 A.D.–232 A.D.)

Born in 185, Origen was barely seventeen years old when a bloody persecution of the church in Alexandria broke out. (Alexandria was an important seaport of Egypt, on the left bank of the Nile). His father, Leonides, who admired Origen's precocious genius and was charmed by his virtuous life, had given him an excellent literary education. When Leonides was cast into prison, Origen wrote an enthusiastic letter to his father exhorting him to persevere courageously. Origen's father was killed, and Origen labored to support himself, his mother, and his six younger brothers. This he successfully accomplished by becoming a teacher and selling his manuscripts, and by the generous aid of a certain rich lady who admired his talents. Origen believed that proclaiming universal reconciliation to the unconverted might be dangerous for them, and so the idea should be presented guardedly. He wrote about the purification of sinners, which was a part of Origen's view of universal reconciliation, "But the remarks which might be made on this topic are neither to be made at all, ... [but] for the sake of those who are with difficulty restrained, even by fear of eternal [aeternum] punishment, from plunging into any degree of wickedness, and into the flood of evils which result from sin."<sup>7</sup>

## Eschatology: The End

One of the central claims of the Christian tradition has been that "God is love." Such a claim is not based on any abstract or sentimental notions about love; rather it is connected to the history of God's love expressed through God's activities of creation, redemption, and sustenance. That history finds its expression in the doctrine of the Trinity. As Rowan Williams suggests,

"God reveals himself" means that the meaning of the word "God" establishes itself among us as the loving and nurturing advent of newness in human life—grace, forgiveness, empowerment to be the agents of forgiveness and liberation. This advent has its centre, its normative focus, in the record of Jesus; it occurs among us now as the re-presentation of Jesus through the Spirit; and it rests upon and gives content to the fundamental regulative notion of initiative, creative or generative power, potentiality, that is not circumscribed by the conditions of the empirical world. . . ."<sup>8</sup>

To know God is to erupt with God out of nothing. We are invited into the difficult consciousness of knowing that we did not create ourselves and are in need of someone beyond ourselves. This is a difficult consciousness because the inclination of many is to abandon the art of the spiritual life of inhabiting God's ways. The natural tendency of Western Christians is more toward definition.

Instead of our own limiting and pragmatic definitions of what God can do in our midst, we need an eschatological hope in which there will be community enough for all persons to discover their destiny together. It is often only directly

through cross-cultural experience or vicariously through study of other cultures that one begins to imagine in intelligible ways how those who are different may find a common destiny.

I claim that African sensibilities inhabit what I describe as sacramental balance. The primary aim of such balance is to facilitate the full journey of the individual and community to their complete end or goal in the life of God. In the same way, sensitivity to the difference of worldviews relating to the spiritual life is thus a prerequisite for fruitful, grace-filled sharing and discernment of the fullness of what spirituality can come to mean in the eschaton. I conclude that African eschatological vision provides a needed corrective to the nearsighted vision of Western religious persons.

In the West, especially from the time of the Enlightenment, the self has been understood as a distinct individual, with unique value and distinct rights. Such personal emphasis places supreme value on the right of self-determination, self-achievement, and self-satisfaction. It is often justified that such personal responsibility for the shaping of one's life is a good and flows from the *imago Dei* understanding of the dignity and worth of each human being. What is weak in this personal dimensional worldview is the lack of criteria for how a person bonds with her community. This lack of criteria, especially in modernity and particularly in North American culture, accentuates personal salvation as the primary criterion for understanding Christian spirituality. The Western criterion of spirituality has profoundly influenced all facets of life, including politics, economics, and religion. More important to my concern here, the Western criterion of spirituality is informed by an eschatology in which personal salvation becomes the normative goal of life. We learn from African Christian spirituality, however, that eschatology must always be balanced between personal and communal salvation.

According to African sensibilities, the totally self-sufficient human being is subhuman. We depend on others to learn how to be human, how to think as a human being, how to eat as a human being, how to walk as a human being. I need others in order to be human. That is why the cutthroat competitiveness of the so-called free enterprise system is so disturbing for African persons such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu.<sup>9</sup> Persons should not compete against other persons to know who they are; rather, we should cooperate in order to know who we are. Tutu explains this problem through a particular example of how Western culture tends to depend on competition to form human identity:

One day at a party in England for some reason we were expected for our tea. I offered to buy a cup for an acquaintance. Now, he could have said: "No, thank you." You could have knocked me down with a feather when he replied, "No, I won't be subsidized!" Well, I never. I suppose it was an understandable attitude. You want to pay your own way and not sponge on others. But it is an attitude that many have seemed to carry over into their relationship with God—their refusal to be subsidized by God. It all stems very much from the prevailing achievement ethic which permeates our very existence. It is drummed into our heads from our most impressionable days that you must succeed. At school you must not just do well, no you must grind the opposition into the dust. We get so worked up that our children can become nervous wrecks as they are egged on to greater efforts by competitive parents. Our culture has it that ulcers have become status symbols.<sup>10</sup>

There must be something seriously wrong with a system that encourages a high degree of competitiveness and selfishness in a world in which we seem to have been made for interdependence. Something is clearly wrong with a group of people whose goal is to achieve success despite the dehumanization that results. More provocatively, competition is the sign of the fall of creation, and it is the opposite of *ubuntu*.

Have you seen a symphony orchestra? They are all dolled and beautiful with their magnificent instruments, cellos, violins, etc. Sometimes dolled up as the rest, is a chap at the back carrying a triangle. Now and again the conductor will point to him and he will play "ting." That might seem so insignificant but in the conception of the composer something irreplaceable would be lost to the total beauty of the symphony if that "ting" did not happen.<sup>11</sup>

Crucial to an African spirituality of community is the fact that the destiny of the individual and the community are bound together. When good is done, it is good for the entire community, and when evil is committed, the shame or the victimization affects the whole community. An African person practices this destiny of the community through what I describe as the sacraments of various initiation rites that have been and, to a certain extent, still remain vital to the interpretation of what is African. The rites of passage practiced among African communities integrate the person into the society so that she or he may find identity within community. This rite of passage continues beyond death, since ancestors are regarded as intrinsically part of the community, able to influence events and guide the community. This emphasis upon maturity and passage into deeper stages flows from an African communal sense of personhood in which the individual becomes conscious of herself through social interaction. An African person discovers self through what is expected of personhood in terms of relationship to a clan in which cultural norms and responsibilities become intelligible. In essence, African personhood is understood through rites of passage toward an eschatological end. Through these initiation rites, all of life is seen as sacramental, visible signs of invisible grace. For the African person, all of life is one continuous movement of community from birth to death and beyond. An African person acts, therefore, in concert with the community and not apart from it.

When a Western person, formed in a worldview of the sole importance of the individual, meets an African person, the Western person meets someone whose experience of the self is distinctly different from the Western eschatology of personal salvation. In contrast to the Western individual, the African individual does not exist apart from the community; therefore, there is an eschatological goal of communal salvation. The African person is part of the whole, and African identity flows from the corporate experience and never in isolation from it, especially since it is African community that defines who an African person is and who an African person becomes. This is not a utilitarian sensibility, such as that which many Westerners want to impose on African community. Instead, in African eschatology, the uniqueness of each person is affirmed and acknowledged, but African individuality and freedom are always balanced by the destiny of the community. From this balanced destiny I conclude that African eschatology is more concerned about communal salvation than the personal salvation so often envisioned by Western Christian spirituality.

1. See Brian E. Daley's *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1991).
2. *De Anima et resurrectione*.
3. See 1 Corinthians 15:28.
4. See Ephesians 2:7.
5. See Ephesians 4:16.
6. See Isaiah 57:6.
7. Origen, *Against Celsus*, 6:26.
8. Rowan Williams, "Trinity and Revelation" *Modern Theology* 2 (1986), 208.
9. Desmond Tutu, *Postscript: To Be Human Is to Be Free*, 317.
10. Desmond Tutu, "What Jesus Means to Me" (addresses and speeches, Durban University, August 6–7, 1981).
11. *Ibid.*